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Letters to the Editor

Rostow on Westmoreland

In a Feb. 20 editorial the Journal asserted that "the very worst sin" of the CBS documentary "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception" was its failure to include any of Dr. W.W. Rostow's filmed interview on the order-of-battle controversy. Your editors apparently believe that Dr. Rostow gave CBS information that would have upended the broadcast's thesis: This is not true. Dr. Rostow's unedited transcript and correspondence are part of the court record and stands as the best guide to what he did and did not say.

One example of the information that the Journal suggests we suppressed is Dr. Rostow's statement that Gen. Westmoreland had predicted a major offensive at Tet. On the contrary, "The Uncounted Enemy" went to considerable lengths to state that the offensive had been predicted months in advance. The documentary's point was that the surprise lay not in the attack itself, but in its size and scope, which revealed an enemy far more numerous than acknowledged in the military's doctored intelligence reports.

The Journal also suggests that we kept out a statement by Dr. Rostow that the President knew about the intelligence dispute. But the broadcast did not state or even imply that anyone responsible for national security in 1967 was unaware of the conflict between the military and the CIA over enemy strength estimates. Indeed we reported that this battle took place at the CIA with representatives from all agencies involved in national security present. The documentary's point was that although CIA officers suspected it, no one then knew that Gen. Westmoreland's officers had arbitrarily reduced their best intelligence estimates and were arguing at a National Intelligence Estimate meeting for a dishonest position.

The Journal did not complain about our decision not to include other portions of Dr. Rostow's interview, such as his admission to Mike Wallace that he had directed what amounted to a "propaganda campaign" in the months before Tet to sell the American people on the notion that we were winning the war. Nor did it criticize us for failing to include the interview statement (later repeated in sworn testimony) of a senior CIA official who said that Dr. Rostow had pressured the agency to produce falsely optimistic reports on pacification. In retrospect, we probably should have carried some of this information for it might have better explained the fierce pressures on Gen. Westmoreland to report good news from the front.

The idea, however, that Walt Rostow's other interview statements in any way explain away the testimony of the numerous military and CIA officers is absurd. Five former CIA officials stated under oath that CBS properly characterized the events it chronicled as a "conspiracy"; both Gen. Westmoreland's intelligence chief and his order-of-battle chief offered devastating testimony, and some 20 military intelligence officers admitted under oath to their participation or acquiescence in suppressing or altering intelligence.

Significantly, Dr. Rostow made clear in his interview that there is no reason to believe that the President was aware of any of the acts of deception that we reported and which the court record has now documented as having taken place. Thus the Journal's reliance on Dr. Rostow to conclude that the President somehow knew about the "cooking of the books" seems more than ill advised.

I do not write in blind defense of "The Uncounted Enemy." Any reporter who has gone through an extended libel action would be inhuman not to have learned certain lessons. Specifically it seems with hindsight that it would have been helpful to provide more context (perhaps even at the expense of some fresh material) and particularly to have focused more on the role of President Johnson and Dr. Rostow in pressuring the military to come up with good news on the war. It would have been useful to provide the explanation offered by some thoughtful observers that Gen. Westmoreland may have suppressed the higher estimates in order to buy time for a war that he genuinely thought was winnable.

Ironically these second thoughts are very much in keeping with the spirit and substance of your first editorial on "The Uncounted Enemy" written two years ago just before Gen. Westmoreland filed his suit.

Then you criticized us for "covering the story as a two bit cover-up when it was a Greek tragedy," but nonetheless "commended" CBS for its initial impulse in recognizing that "there is a story of surpassing significance in the pre-Tet intelligence." The editorial went on to conclude that CBS had "at least opened the door that leads to the most important lesson of Vietnam."

So you can understand my puzzlement upon reading your editorial written just after Gen. Westmoreland withdrew his suit. It declared that the "program never belonged on the air." This turnabout is hard to understand given the unique testimony that stands as the one positive and enduring legacy of Westmoreland vs. CBS.

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CBS News

New York

(An editorial on this subject appears today.—Ed.)

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